DIVERSITY NEWS
March 2006

Yvonne: No matter how we measure it, the amount of information we need in order to do our jobs well is constantly increasing.

Thomas: And it may be unreasonable to expect any one person to keep up with all that information. That's ONE reason why teamwork is so important: A group of diverse employees, focusing their energies and intentions toward meeting a common goal, can be much more effective than any one of those employees acting alone.

Yvonne: But it's not enough just to throw a bunch of people at a problem and expect something magical to happen. The team's greatest asset—its diversity— can become its greatest liability if the team members don't work well together.

Thomas: In this edition of Diversity News, we'll talk about what it takes to make teams work well, and we'll look at ways to overcome problems that may arise.

Yvonne: Following that, we'll check the diversity calendar for important events and observances in March.

Thomas: In his book, "The Five Dysfunctions of Teams," Patrick Lencioni draws attention to natural human tendencies that can interfere with the optimal performance of teams: An Absence of Trust, The Fear of Conflict, A Lack of Commitment, The Avoidance of Accountability, and Inattention to Results.

According to Lencioni, members of GREAT teams TRUST one another on a fundamental level, and they are comfortable being open with one another about their weaknesses, their mistakes, their fears, and their actions.

That fundamental TRUST is essential because team members who trust one another are not afraid to engage in PASSIONATE DEBATE over issues that are essential to the team's success.

And that PASSIONATE DEBATE, that CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT, is important in order to ensure that all opinions and ideas are considered, so that the team can achieve genuine BUY-IN to important decisions.

And that BUY-IN, that COMMITMENT, is critical in order to ensure that team members hold each other ACCOUNTABLE for adhering to the decisions that the team makes.

Team members who TRUST one another, who engage in constructive CONFLICT, who COMMIT to decisions, and who hold one another ACCOUNTABLE are more likely to set aside their personal agendas and focus

on what is best for the team (and for the organization as a whole) AND on the RESULTS that define success.

Yvonne: In response to requests from readers for more practical advice on how to address the five dysfunctions of teams, Lencioni wrote another book: "OVERCOMING the Five Dysfunctions of a Team." In THIS book, Lencioni provides examples of team-building exercises that address each of the dysfunctions.

For instance, to address issues of TRUST, Lencioni suggests using the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory to provide team members with an objective, reliable means for understanding and describing one another.

The Myers-Briggs Type Inventory is an assessment tool for identifying 16 different personality types, based on a person's preferences in four categories.

The first category has to do with two different ways of focusing your attention: either extraversion or introversion. People who prefer EXTRAVERSION tend to relate easily to the OUTER world of people and things; people who prefer INTROVERSION tend to relate easily to the INNER world of ideas and impressions.

The second category has to do with two different ways of taking in information: either sensing or intuition. People who prefer SENSING tend to be interested in what the FIVE SENSES show them—what exists in the PRESENT; people who prefer INTUITION tend to use their imagination to see new possibilities and insights, and focus on the FUTURE.

The THIRD category has to do with two different ways of making decisions: either thinking or feeling. People who prefer THINKING tend to base decisions on OBJECTIVE ANALYSIS and LOGIC; people who prefer FEELING, on the other hand, tend to base decisions on VALUES and PEOPLE-CENTERED CONCERNS.

The last category has to do with two different ways of dealing with the outer world: judging or perceiving. People who prefer JUDGING tend to like to have things decided, and their lives are likely to be planned and orderly; in contrast, people who prefer PERCEIVING tend to not want to MISS anything, and their lives are likely to be spontaneous and flexible.

Lencioni suggests that, after discovering their Myers-Briggs type, team members share that information with other members of the team. The team can then discuss members' similarities and differences and also examine how the COLLECTIVE type of the team manifests itself, including areas of potential strength and weakness.

Thomas: In order for team members to engage in constructive CONFLICT, they need to understand each other's viewpoints on (and comfort level with) the expression of interpersonal disagreement. Some people are comfortable arguing passionately and expressing their opinions aggressively (and LOUDLY!); other people are not comfortable voicing even the mildest of dissenting opinions.

A person's Myers-Briggs profile includes information on how a particular type of person prefers to deal with conflict. An assessment tool that specifically addresses conflict MODES is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument.

The Thomas-Kilman Model describes five different approaches to conflict, according to how people think about the importance of a TASK versus the importance of their RELATIONSHIP with the people they are working with.

When COMPETING, an individual pursues his or her own concerns at the other person's expense.

When ACCOMMODATING, an individual neglects his or her own concerns to satisfy another person. When AVOIDING, an individual does not immediately pursue either his or her own concerns, or the concerns of the other person.

When COLLABORATING, an individual attempts to work with the other person to find a solution that satisfies them both.

When COMPROMISING, the objective is to find an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that at least minimally satisfies both parties.

Yvonne: To achieve commitment, Lencioni offers several ideas for team-building exercises. For example, to provide team members with a common sense of purpose, he recommends that team members come to an agreement on the answer to the question, "What is the single most important goal that we must achieve in order to consider ourselves successful?

To create clarity within the team around a variety of fundamental issues, Lencioni suggests having team members come to an agreement on the team's core PURPOSE and core VALUES, and on team members' roles and responsibilities.

To create clarity within the team around how members will DEAL with one another on an ongoing basis, Lencioni recommends having team members come to an agreement on issues like the structure and schedule for meetings, acceptable behavior DURING meetings, preferred methods for communication, the use of common resources, and other issues of importance to the team.

To ensure that team members leave meetings with NO AMBIGUITY about what they've agreed upon, Lencioni recommends SUMMARIZING decisions at the end of meetings. Immediately following that summary, team members should decide

which of the commitments and agreements should be communicated to the rest of the organization. And after the meeting, the team members do exactly what they've agreed to do.

Thomas: To give team members a way to provide one another with focused, direct, and actionable feedback about how their individual behavior can improve the performance of the team, Lencioni suggests having team members write their answers to the following questions about other members on the team:

First of all: "What is that person's single most important behavioral quality that contributes to the STRENGTH of the team?"

Secondly: "What is that person's single most important behavioral quality that DETRACTS from the strength of the team?"

Then, beginning with the team leader, have each of the team members read out loud the POSITIVE qualities that other team members have identified for them. After everyone has had their turn, have each team member read aloud the NEGATIVE qualities that other team members have identified for them. Finally, have each team member summarize one or two issues that he or she commits to addressing.

Yvonne: According to Lencioni, if team members TRUST one another, engage in healthy CONFLICT around issues, COMMIT to the decisions they make, and hold one another ACCOUNTABLE for those decisions, the team has a pretty good chance of ACHIEVING its goals.

To provide team members with a clear and useful means of quickly MEASURING its success, Lencioni suggests having team members come to an agreement on the measurable objectives that must be accomplished in order to achieve success, and then create a simple "scoreboard" to keep track of the team's progress toward meeting its goals.

Thomas: The VA Learning University offers a couple dozen online courses that address aspects of team-building, several of which examine ways of handling conflict.

For example, "Analyzing Workplace War Zones" includes information on getting team conflicts out in the open and dealing with them effectively.

"Conquering Conflict Through Communication" discusses the use of active listening skills and effective feedback in order to diffuse strong emotions in unhealthy conflict.

"Team Conflict: The Seeds of Dissent" identifies the different stages of conflict and the group dynamics that can cripple team effectiveness.

"Getting Past Clashes: Valuing Team Diversity" specifically addresses issues related to conflict arising from team members' differences.

And "The Path to Peace and Harmony" takes a "big picture" approach similar to Lencioni's: examining the importance of defining and communicating the team's purpose and goals, enlisting team members to manage performance, building trust among team members, and identifying underlying conflict issues.

Yvonne: In addition to courses on managing team conflict, the VA Learning University offers other online courses on effective team-building strategies.

For example, "Effective Team-Building Strategies" explores techniques to avoid potential problems and to help promote and maintain a creative and productive atmosphere.

"LAUNCHING Successful On-Site and Virtual Teams" provides techniques for setting up a successful team, including strategies for selecting high-performance team members, setting goals, establishing ground rules, and building a cohesive team culture.

"FACILITATING On-Site and Virtual Teams" provides strategies to address problems that arise during the development stages of maturing teams. The course includes techniques for strengthening the team, evaluating team effectiveness, and boosting creativity.

"Making Cross-Generational Teams WORK" covers the benefits and challenges of teaming Silent Generation, Baby Boom Generation, Generation X, and Generation Y employees.

And "Effectively Communicating in Teams" presents ways to communicate productively and non-judgmentally, to listen effectively, to assert yourself, and to provide and receive constructive feedback.

Thomas: In the diversity calendar this month,

March is National Women's History Month. This year's theme is "Women: Builders of Communities and Dreams."

March is also Irish-American Heritage Month.

Yvonne: The National Council of La Raza Capital Awards will be on March 7th in Washington, DC.

International Women's Day is March 8th. This year's theme is "Inspiring Potential."

Thomas: The 24th Annual National Conference of the United States Hispanic Leadership Institute will be in Chicago, Illinois, March 8th through the 12th.

March 13th marks the beginning of Deaf History Month which extends until April 15th.

Yvonne: The Pacific Rim Conference on Disabilities will be in Waikiki, Hawaii, March 13th through the 15th.

A DeafNation Expo will be held in Orlando, Florida on March 18th.

Thomas: Careers & the disAbled Magazine's Career Expo for People With Disabilities is scheduled for March 23rd in New York City.

The National Hispanic Medical Association's tenth annual conference, "Somos Unidos: United to Eliminate Health Disparities for Hispanics," will be in Washington, DC, from March 23rd through the 26th.

Yvonne: March 25th marks Greek Independence Day.

The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities will be holding its 11th Annual National Capitol Forum on Hispanic Higher Education March 26th through the 28th in Washington, DC.

The Society for Human Resource Management will host the 37th annual Employment Management Association conference and exposition in San Diego, California, from March 30th to April 1st.

And César Chávez Day is March 31st.

Thomas: You can find more information on those events, and on other observances and conferences, on the Diversity Management Web site at the address shown below. Just click on the link to the calendar.

Yvonne: That's all we have for this edition of Diversity News. Be sure to check back with us next month when we'll be looking at what it takes for an organization to become "an employer of choice."

Thomas: Until then, for more frequent doses of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink. Just send an e-mail message to the address shown below, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

Yvonne: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also, we want to hear from you! If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov with the words DIVERSITY NEWS in the subject line.

Until next time…

Both: Have a great month!